

raise. It is time for us to get our priorities straight. I am proud to cosponsor my colleague, Senator KENNEDY's, amendment to increase the minimum wage. I urge my colleagues to join me in voting in its favor.

Mr. REID. Mr. President, I rise today in support of giving 56,000 Nevadans a raise by increasing the Federal minimum wage to \$7.25 an hour.

My colleagues have done an excellent job of making the case for this raise. My side has pointed out it has been nearly 10 years since the minimum wage was last increased. We have communicated that the current wage is woefully inadequate, that someone who works full-time and makes the minimum wage lives below the poverty line. We have also talked about how minimum wage workers don't make enough to provide their families adequate housing, food, and essentials like clothing. We have talked about all the facts. So what I wish to do now is appeal to the Senate's sense of fairness.

All of us in the Senate, don't we believe that someone working full time should be able to live a life out of poverty? I believe the answer is yes, and I believe that is reason enough for us all to vote yes to increasing this wage. Three times in the last Congress the Republican leadership brought down a minimum wage bill rather than have an up-or-down vote. We can't wait any longer. There are only a few weeks left in this Congress, and those 56,000 Nevadans deserve a raise.

I know the majority has a proposal to raise the minimum wage by about a dollar an hour but it is not enough. It doesn't impact nearly enough Americans and won't make a big enough difference. Whereas an increase to \$7.25 will help over 5 million Americans, the majority amendment will help only 2. Moreover, our amendment will mean an additional \$4,370 a year to help minimum wage earners support their families. An increase of this size can help offset the cost of high gas prices, not to mention the costs of health care, food, and other needs.

Mr. President, I urge my colleagues to pass a graduated increase of the minimum wage to \$7.25 per hour.

Mr. FEINGOLD. Mr. President, I speak today in support of efforts to increase the Federal minimum wage and urge my colleagues to vote in support of Senator KENNEDY's amendment to increase the Federal minimum wage to \$7.25 an hour over the next 2 years. This much-needed increase would benefit over 7 million Americans directly and approximately 8 million Americans indirectly. The Federal minimum wage has not been increased in almost 9 years and action by Congress is long overdue. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities notes that after adjusting for inflation, the value of the minimum wage is at its lowest level since 1955. As the costs of housing, health care, energy, and education continue to skyrocket, we must raise the minimum wage to provide millions of

hard-working Americans the respect and dignity their work demands.

I think it is unconscionable that in the almost 9 years that we have not raised the minimum wage, Congress has voted to increase its own pay by \$31,600. Most recently, last November we allowed the \$3,100 pay raise to go through for Members of Congress. People will find it hard to understand why Members of Congress received substantial pay raises at a time when the real value of the minimum wage has eroded by 20 percent since 1997. As my colleagues know, I have long fought against automatic congressional pay increases and will continue to do so. I have introduced legislation that would put an end to automatic cost-of-living adjustments for congressional pay. We have Americans who are working full time, 52 weeks a year and they cannot afford health care, housing, and child care. They don't have the power to automatically raise their pay—they are dependent on Congress to raise the Federal minimum wage. But instead of working to raise the minimum wage, we in Congress have worked to protect our automatic pay raises.

Over 20 States and the District of Columbia have responded to congressional inaction and have passed or are in the process of passing State minimum wage increases above the Federal level. I am proud to report that my State of Wisconsin is one of these States that have passed a minimum wage increase. Last June, Wisconsin raised its minimum wage to \$5.70 an hour and earlier this month, raised its minimum wage again to \$6.50 an hour. The State Department of Workforce Development estimates that this modest two-step increase will benefit an estimated 200,000 low wage workers in Wisconsin.

While this increase is a step in the right direction, it is still not enough to even ensure that minimum wage employees can pay for affordable housing in Wisconsin. The National Low Income Housing Coalition estimates that the fair market rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Wisconsin is \$647 a month and calculates that a full-time minimum wage employee needs to work 77 hours a week, 52 weeks a year to afford a two-bedroom apartment. Mr. President, 77 hours a week is almost the equivalent of two full-time minimum wage workers and the number of hours of work required to cover the costs of an apartment are even higher in States with higher housing costs. It is a disgrace that in many cases, minimum wage workers cannot afford adequate housing or are forced to pay a huge share of their income to cover housing costs.

Housing costs are not the only necessity of life that minimum wage workers have to provide for themselves and their families. They also have to purchase groceries, provide health care, pay for higher education, pay for increasingly expensive gas and electric costs, and provide child care for their

children. Some Americans may think that the majority of minimum wage workers are teenagers in the first job; that perception is incorrect. The Economic Policy Institute notes that over 70 percent of minimum wage workers are adults and in Wisconsin, over 80 percent of minimum wage workers are adults. Moreover, of these adult minimum wage workers, over 30 percent are the sole breadwinners of their families.

More and more of these working Americans find themselves mired in poverty or living on the cusp of poverty. Currently, there are 37 million Americans living in poverty, including 13 million children. Among full-time, year-round workers, poverty has increased by 50 percent in the late 1970s. Minimum wage workers who work full time earn \$10,700 a year, which is almost \$6,000 below the Federal poverty guidelines for a family of three. No American should work full-time, year-round and still live in poverty. This modest increase in the Federal minimum wage will not eliminate poverty, but it will provide hard-working Americans with a much-needed increase in their wages. This increase would provide more money for workers to purchase prescription drugs, to pay utilities and rent, to provide child care for their children, and to invest in higher education opportunities. This increase is needed because the majority of the poor people in our country are working and are holding down low-paying jobs with stagnant wages that do not allow them to finally break free from poverty.

Opponents of this amendment argue that it hurts the economy and job growth. In the 4 years after the last minimum wage increase, nearly 12 million new jobs were created. In the last 4 years, only 4.7 million jobs have been created and the real value minimum wage continues to erode. A 1998 Economic Policy Institute study did not find significant job loss associated with the 1997 minimum wage increase. Additionally, the Center on Wisconsin Strategy examined job growth after the June 2005 increase in Wisconsin's minimum wage and found that Wisconsin had an average growth of 30,000 more jobs, not a job loss. History shows that minimum wage increases have not had a negative impact on unemployment.

I was proud to vote for the 1996-1997 increase bringing the minimum wage to its current level of \$5.15 an hour and I am pleased to be a cosponsor of this amendment by Senator KENNEDY to increase the minimum wage to \$7.25 an hour. When the minimum wage was established in 1938, its purpose was to ensure that American workers were fairly compensated for a day's work. But today, the minimum wage isn't living up to that promise. Far more work needs to be done to support hard-working American families, and Congress can start by increasing the minimum wage.